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# THE ÆSTHETIC IDEAL

BY FR. ROUSSEL-DESPIERRES

*Translated from the French*

## BOOK II—CHAPTER III—*Continued*

### THE ÆSTHETIC LIFE

THE Ideal finds its accomplishment in the æsthetic life. It has two faces: art and morality, both of which surround society. If education has reached its goal, beauty has become a habit of the body and mind, and that habit governs life.

Realization of the æsthetic life depends on two conditions: a return to the simple life, and the existence of an intellectual aristocracy.

Return to the simple life? Tolstoi, Ruskin and so many others have shown us the benefits of that! But it meets an almost invincible enemy in our unreasonable faith in progress, that progress which in truth hitherto has consisted only in complicating our existence by multiplying industrial novelties. That fever, that fury of activity renders æsthetic enjoyment impossible, for the latter supposes leisure and calmness of mind. Will the æsthetic faith put it through? It may reckon on two auxiliaries: first, on physical weariness, the rebellion of the body and the worn out senses, then—really, it will be necessary for the medical faculty to lend its aid—on the fear occasioned by this using up of the nerves hastened by excess of life, by near-approaching failure, by the vertigo and fall of the race into madness and death.

Industrialism permits only of easy pleasures quickly gained and as quickly lost: alcohol, the public woman, plagues of the same kind, which can only be extinguished along with it. A return to simplicity, the reflex wave from the cities toward the country, social peace and morality relying one upon the other—humanity accomplishing its voluntary destiny in its infinite dream of beauty—there lies the æsthetic life!

That implies a recognition of an aristocracy of the mind. Social life, even as individual life, is a climbing without end, because the moral horizon and the æsthetic horizon are infinite.

In art, in nature, in thought, beauty takes on a thousand forms, from the humblest to the wisest. If one may so express it, there are innumerable steps of beauty, and it is necessary that such should be the case. People have maintained that art ought to be popular, democratic, accessible to all the levels of intelligence—and that is true. But if they pretend that it can not be at the same time aristocratic, they are mistaken, and poorly understand the rôle of art and its true character. Art has no value except in so far as it procures pleasure; for pleasure is the condition itself of its influence and the infinite shades of intellectual cultivation as well as the variety in temperaments demand that all of us can not enjoy the same pleasures, love the same qualities of art. But there is this more: art can not live and will not be immortal save at the expense of a sustained endeavor toward a higher kind of beauty. Æsthetic feeling dies out, if it ceases to grow.

Art has declared an eternal war against vulgarity.

The ignoble café-concert being overcome, we may be certain that some other low spectacle will still allure the coarse instincts of the people. We shall not triumph over that, unless we know how to exalt very high the æsthetic feeling of the crowd. Only when a soul delights in the most learned and delicate expressions of beauty does it become inaccessible to low and ugly temptations. On the contrary, a soul attached to humble and vulgar pleasures belonging to inferior art can scarcely resist such temptations.

Intelligence, love, morality, artistic invention, even talent decline, just like living organisms, as soon as they cease growing. Intellectual cultivation, like moral culture, is favorable to the continuous rise of the popular soul. In order to guide that ascension, humanity demands the raisers of torches, an aristocracy of art, who can sustain it and draws toward it the uncertain and tottering mass by a sustained effort. So that art will be aristocratic—or rather art will continue to be an infinitely rich and diverse world.

Æsthetic life is not possible without an intellectual *élite*. Besides, can any one believe that social existence is possible without it? The veritable history of humanity would be one that relates the conquest of superior forms of the beautiful and the good. Who creates these forms? The wise men themselves, the savants, artists and thinkers. 'Tis they who nourish the cultivated minds, the polemical writers, the statesmen and also the crowd in fine, with ideas, with facts and with symbols. They mold, one may say, the brain of nations, and slowly create that general mentality which is decisive for transformations in customs and then in laws. The *élite* may be compared to a faculty, the over-development of which will be necessary to the development of an organism. Artists, philosophers, poets, who dominate the crowd and govern through the all-powerfulness of feeling and idea assume an immense responsibility with regard to the future. These are the true directors of humanity. Sovereigns, ministers, parliaments are only weakened reflections from the intellectual *élite*; and doubtless some day the latter will inherit the usurped power of the former; then will the æsthetic society be constituted. Very probably it will include no other subjection and hierarchy than that of the crowd and the *élite*.<sup>46</sup>

Is that as much as to say that this aristocracy of art will enclose itself within some asylum of splendor and glory inaccessible to the crowd? It will be the task of the *élite* and its real triumph to open the supreme sanctuary of the æsthetic ideal to an ever-growing number of intellects. But in order to reach the temple it is necessary beforehand to climb to the acropolis!

<sup>46</sup> Note 46.—The intellectual *élite* is not an aristocracy of privileges and enjoyment. One may say that it constitutes an aristocracy of charges, since by accepting the moral government it assumes thereby the whole responsibility.

Of the two parts of the æsthetic life, art is not the loftier, but it is the supporting base of moral existence; the leisures of art will be absorbed in turn into collective efforts and domestic labors.

It would be a chimera and contradiction to establish a frame about the artistic organization of life, when the æsthetic pleasure has precisely for its principle liberty, the personal fancy of the art-lover. Each person will have his own art, and the æsthetic leisure for each family will be varied if the tastes of its members are diverse. But it is well to indicate at least two consequences, moral and social, of the collective efforts of those communities of art which can not fail to be formed. Communal decorations, symphonic representatives, dramatic performances and a close collaboration will establish durable bonds of affection between painters, decorators, musicians and actors. A common enjoyment will strengthen mutual confidence. The practice of art will inculcate in all the desire to be beautiful, and they will serve as models and teachers one to the other. Another happy consequence will result: the two sexes being brought together during the preparations for these artistic festivals, above all will learn to know one another better! The man will understand better feminine delicacy and strip himself of his natural coarseness and *brusquerie*. The woman, worthier of confidence and more respected, will remain a coquette, but will become honestly and loyally beautiful and seductive. The surest way to love one another better is to understand one another better. Friendship between woman and man will become possible and love will cease to be a fragile thing among beings more worthy of love.

But there will be better things than private festivals. Societies will unite and group themselves about a poet; and the latter will provide scenarios by turn graceful or grandiose, and, in order to produce them, thousands of artists will offer their support. Our French July Fourteenth, when sacred hymns are prostituted in drunken mouths amid the clatter of fire-crackers and refrains from hunting horns, make our public festivals hateful. No longer do these popular anniversaries impress the fraternal emotion of a grand common symbol on the soul of the people. Festivals in future will be beautiful conceptions of art, regulated with harmony, and their carrying out will be perfect. Symbols of a great idea, they will cause all hearts to beat with the incomparable tremor that comes of collective enthusiasm. And being very beautiful, at the same time they will be profoundly moralizing, because they are beautiful and because they are fraternal.

As complete works of art, they will form a synthesis of all the arts. They will realize that dream of the fusion of the arts which so far no spectacle has been able to accomplish—a fusion, in fact, impossible in our ballrooms or theatres, which are so uncomfortable and unhealthy, where the tightly crowded mass of spectators always appears ugly! The convergence of the arts toward a maximum of emotion has a natural limitation in our faculty of nervous vibration and this faculty must not be contradicted by physical discomfort. No, it is in the open air, beneath blue skies, that the real public festivals will display all their splendor and reach the highest intensity of emotion! There, nothing will

falsify or retard emotion, and, by a harmoniously graded series of steps, art will take hold of us through the most delicate tremors of our senses, by the unquiet movements of the heart, amid the mysterious troublings of thought. Drama, music, orchestration, statuary's work and decoration—supreme art will raise us to the highest imaginable level of æsthetic enjoyment, borrowing one after the other all the different means of expression and sometimes massing them.

But there is another more universal and fruitful employment of artistic talents, because it is more moral still, that is, the embellishment of the house, of the "home." It must be that the action of the hearth on the soul shall be intense, since the decoration of the interior, the furnishing of a house reveals so exactly the spirit of an epoch. Here one can fairly say *le style c'est l'homme* (style and man are one). Furniture of the time of Louis XV reveals a society, customs, ideas very different from those which bear the stamp of the Empire. Between furniture and spirit an action and reaction operate mutually; man makes the furniture, furniture makes the man. Our modern society had to come to this dislocated "modern style," so capricious, all on the surface, without lasting quality—neuropathetic. . . .

Is it anything else but neuropathy, with its changing humors, always in agitation, incapable of repose? The family house is no longer more than a legend. In a great hurry we quit an apartment, soon lacking all freshness, where we have encamped for a few seasons. Why encumber ourselves with furniture, which will last longer and which will not be in the right place in a new apartment? The mobility of life has to arrange itself as well as it can with unhandy, fragile and ugly pieces of furniture. We live so little at home! So many people seem to inhabit their houses only long enough to receive their passing friends of a day! It is for their friends, not for oneself, that the house is organized. What is the good of solid, comfortable furniture, if we never rest? In its turn that furniture renders the apartment uninhabitable and inhospitable toward its owners, drives them out of the home onto the great roadways of the world. Instability of life exasperates the nerves, uses up the race, makes it ugly. There is no beauty and power except in what lasts, and if property guarantees liberty, it is no less necessary for health, taste for the beautiful, and definitively for morality.

The house full of happiness is the one that knows how to keep us. 'Tis there that happiness seats itself by our side. It is necessary that it be ours, because of recollections, because of the merging of the soul into its very walls, its shady corners and well-known shafts of sunlight, the smiling look of remembered articles of furniture, the kindly physiognomy of the pictures and prints on which our thoughts have so often dwelt. The house is a part of ourselves; it is our thought, from which we shall never exile ourselves; also is it a richness, a wealth, so well does it lend force, solidity, a sureness to the customary thoughts which it creates!

Æsthetic life exacts a fixedness as to the dwelling. When he marries, each man ought to own and create a home. The art of decorating the house will be the supreme talent of the wife, who, while making the

home, will decorate it with her graciousness, her spirit, her tenderness and smile, and keep the husband there. I would that they themselves might fashion the greater part of their furniture with their own hands! Their art, a trifle awkward but entirely personal, will always prove far superior to that of industrial fabrications, so uniform and empty of thought! The slightest bit of sculpture on an easy-chair, a piece of hanging, will recall an endeavor and a joy. Those pieces of furniture will be true witnesses of their love; it was indeed for them alone that they were made. Old hereditary furniture will have a place of honor in the home; they are the ancient family friends, all impregnated with the glances, the breath, the hands of departed generations. Every house ought to have its garden, which the parents and the children themselves will cultivate. Few people know what lessons of kindness the so fragile life of flowers contains, and how great are the joys with which flowers repay our tenderness!

Perchance, by slowing up its useless activity, industry will become less barbarous, the factory more homelike, the atelier more human. Perchance, weary of the revolution of machines, our eyes may hereafter repose themselves on more smiling walls.

Finally, costume is an element of the æsthetic life not to be neglected. The incessant communication of peoples by the iron-railed ways has had the disastrous effect of inflicting uniformity. Nothing more opposed to the æsthetic! Each race has its structure; each trade and also each individual has its and his look. There are no two women or two men to whom the same garment is fitting. But always in uniformity the singular ends by being reborn. Universal, obligatory fashions must disappear. Each individual ought to clothe himself in accordance with his own plasticity. The costume translates the ideal of him who wears it. Let us have no doubt: taste is the guarantee of rectitude of thought and energy of æsthetic feeling; one and the other are necessary to the moral equilibrium of the individual.

Social or domestic art presupposes leisure. Already, in our present conditions, there are few men who are absolutely lacking in leisure. Few hours are enough to enjoy some joys by the way of the arts; but the cabaret consumes everything—time, money, intelligence and strength.<sup>47</sup>

The æsthetic life, as I have said, implies a deep enough transformation of social conditions, and first of all, of measures definitively directed against the cabaret. Also it implies a different kind of industrial

labor. One must be daring enough to say: the æsthetic and moral problem is superior to the material (so badly termed the "social" problem, just as if all the problems that interest humanity were not social)! In truth man has far greater need of the ideal and of joy than he has of bread!

Nevertheless the two problems are linked. It is hard to improve humanity and cause it to live on the higher scale, so long as the immediate wants are not guaranteed. Æsthetic ascension presupposes a powerful moral will, and that is not to be found save in a robust, healthy, well-fed being who is sheltered from the more urgent physical wants.

When the life simplified shall have procured leisure for all those who labor, it is probable that already, and in a parallel way, the formula proper to material security will have been stated. We may expect much from professional syndicates, and that in the near future; their true aim, their highest purpose is, mutual assistance. Besides, in whatever shape it realizes itself, the probability is that assistance will take on the character of absolute universality, and will embrace all necessities, all miseries. Moreover, we may count, for the attainment of such a result, upon the development of fraternal feelings in the æsthetic life.<sup>48</sup>

This new existence must now be regarded from the moral aspect. Moral will and æsthetic will are both of them organic habits. Individual progress consists in acquiring these habits, for this it is that demonstrates the perfectibility of the individual, and, if one may add, the perfectibility of the race. For if there exists an inherited æsthetic instinct, we can not deny inheritance to moral feeling.

A good education realizes the becoming accustomed to duty and virtue, at the same time that it awakes the passion for the Beautiful and the Ideal. Practice of the good merges into the habit and love of beauty. We can not enumerate the effects of will and æsthetic pleasures: these remove us from the mean passions of self-love, jealousy, envy; and deliver us from low hatreds, vulgar ambitions and coarse pleasures. They teach us tolerance, kindness, a deep respect for the happiness and thought of our neighbor. Æsthetic delicacy produces the extreme of moral delicacy. Elegance of action and elegance of thought have the same source.

D'Annunzio puts this sentence in the mouth of one of his heroes:

"We ought to fashion our life as one fashions a work of art" . . .

And in fact the complete æsthetic life is a masterpiece by a great artist. No finer model for mankind's consideration than that marvel, a truly beautiful life! In a singular way it surpasses the loftiest books, the purest marble statues. This marvel today—is it then an impossible prodigy? On the contrary, I have the courage to affirm that it ought to

Note 47.—I do not know that the life of the café is worse than that of the world, such life as that fraction of society which possesses honors and fortune understands. What can be imagined more brutifying than those innumerable visits, for the sake of which so many women fly from their household duties? For the good of the home and of their minds I would that they might renounce with common consent these sterile and painful labors which dry out their souls by exhausting their strength. I do not condemn them to have no true and good female friends—they might see them all the more, if they should free themselves from the conventional chain-gang. I even consent that they should have plenty of "relations" provided they only receive and visit them from time to time. Then they might offer one to the other artistic receptions, true in their elegance and wholesome for the mind—and the frailties of their neighbors would not have to pay the price!

Note 48.—We can hardly dream of confiding the organization of universal assistance to a governmental institution. The ancient family, so large and at the same time circumscribed, sufficed to itself. No wretchedness or want of help under such a dispensation! But who would care to revive the slavery thereof? Besides, present society, with its increasing mobility, carries the modern family along with it. New groupings, federative forms hitherto unknown will appear. We can conceive of differing types of groupings for mutual aid; but this is not the place to define their character.

make its appearance amid the coming concurrence of wills without number.

Certainly no isolated existence could become purely æsthetic during the course of a century in a country given over to material industrialism. All existences that develop themselves on a grateful or ungrateful soil are part and parcel with that soil, and in order that they should be bettered, it is necessary to change its nature.<sup>49</sup>

But the dream of an æsthetic social life is no chimera of a philosopher. It has been lived out. Taine has seen and described it with admirable clearness: "In ancient Greece" he remarks "man made his institutions subordinate, in place of putting himself in subordination to them." He made use of them in order to develop himself harmoniously and as a whole. At one and the same time he was able to be a poet, philosopher, critic, magistrate, priest, judge, citizen and athlete, exercise his limbs, mind and taste, unite twenty kinds of talents in himself, without having one do harm to the other. He was able to be a soldier without being an automaton, dancer and singer without becoming a stage-actor; a thinker and writer, without turning into a man of the library and study; decide public affairs, without surrendering his authority to his representatives; honor his gods, without walling himself up within the formulas of dogma, without crouching beneath the tyranny of a superhuman all-power, without allowing himself to be absorbed in contemplation of a vague, universal Being. It seems that having sketched firmly the visible and precise outlines of man and life, he omitted all the rest and said to himself: "Behold the actual man, an active and sensitive body with thought and will; and behold here the actual life, sixty or seventy years between the stutterings of infancy and the silence of the tomb. Let us take thought how to render

*Note 49.*—Great hopes can not be based on isolated wills. Nevertheless, those profound reforms which the æsthetic life presupposes will reach accomplishment. Societies, a kind of Sworn Gilds, will be formed, whose members, inspired by the same sentiments, will mutually promise to renounce a given social convention, or practice a given rule of existence, or obey certain given principles. Perhaps even (and their influence will then be very different) these associations may embrace an entire cycle of reforms. Vibration started, the contagion of example promises incalculable results. And that it is which permits us to prophesy the near approach of the æsthetic régime.

this body as alert, strong, healthy and beautiful as it possibly can be made, deploy this mind and this will about the entire circle of virile action, ornament this life with all the beauties that delicate senses, a quick mind, a soul all alive and proud can create and enjoy."

Slavery, it will be said, was the ground-word of that harmonious and privileged life; but in modern society everybody works, and the æsthetic existence is nothing but a beautiful dream.

In reply:—The Greeks possessed a harmonious life because they had a life that was simple. Let us return to the simple life, and machinery will amply suffice for the industrial needs of the world, without exacting the maintenance of that factory-servitude which, while oppressing the body, oppresses intelligence—and condemns our society as a whole to a mournfulness, an ugliness, a physical and moral distress which perhaps makes of it the least enviable society known to history, and doubtless likewise one of the least pure.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding this last point one word more. Science, the institutions of each century are passed and forgot. On the contrary, its artistic work remains standing, always young; it is the unique patrimony which stays immortal and always dear to posterity, and it forms the latter's inexhaustible wealth. I know of nothing grander than that solidarity realized by way of art in the æsthetic life between modern humanity and that of the past; nothing more moving than that perpetual resurrection of dead peoples in their masterpieces; nothing more refreshing than the resounding of the eternal Voice of the Ideal in the infinite lives of the races!

*Note 50.*—Here we can get a glimpse of the final consequence of the æsthetic system. Definitely, there is no reason for preserving and perpetuating individual existence except pleasure, that is to say, beauty. Christianity has falsified the fundamental notion of life. Live to suffer—there's its formula—because to suffer is to merit heaven! Live to enjoy—answered the unchained conscience of thinking humanity (and it knows that supreme enjoyment is reached through moral action and artistic creation). Society can not propose for itself any other goal than that which the individual seeks. As soon as the political body (or private initiative) shall have solved the material problem of assistance, legal organization will have no further reason for subsisting than the executing of certain services of common interest and of protecting liberty. Those are the conditions, the *means* toward the æsthetic life. But the very *goal* of social existence will not and can not be other than beauty.

(To be continued.)

